


[Home](#) [News](#) [Renewable Energy from Waste 2014: Making the case for conversion](#)

Renewable Energy from Waste 2014: Making the case for conversion

CONFERENCES & EVENTS, ASSOCIATION NEWS, REW CONFERENCE

Panelists say communications between stakeholders and a receptive public policy environment are keys to winning approval for waste conversion projects.

REW Staff

JANUARY 5, 2015

[Share](#) |

RENEWABLE Energy FROM WASTE CONFERENCE

Forming strong stakeholder partnerships and understanding the nuances of those partnerships are keys to winning support for waste-to-energy conversion projects. Those were the views from a panel of speakers who presented their experiences at the 2014 Renewable Energy from Waste Conference, held Nov. 17-20, 2014, in San Jose, California, during a session titled "Making the Case for Conversion."

The session was moderated by John Skinner, executive director of the [Solid Waste Association of North America](#) (SWANA), who said winning approval for a conversion project requires involvement from residents, opponents, the media, academia and environmental and regulatory entities in addition to political leaders.

Toward that end, Craig Cookson, director of sustainability and recycling for the [Plastics Division of the American Chemistry Council](#) (ACC), Washington, D.C., described how the ACC is working to promote waste conversion technologies, though he said the U.S. waste and recycling industry still has a long way to go to convince those outside the industry that the country should be recovering more energy value from waste.

Cookson referred in particular to plastic packaging that can be difficult to recycle and said the ACC is working to extend the definition of clean energy to include plastics.

"You don't create this plastic packaging to become energy, but it saves a lot of energy on the way by protecting food, by protecting food waste, by reducing shipping costs and greenhouse gas emissions," he said. "Think of these materials as fuels or feedstocks, not as waste."

Along with that, Cookson said there is a need for simplified permitting processes for waste-conversion projects. Toward that end, the ACC has created a chemistry energy campaign to promote energy policy and increase awareness of energy recovery and its efficiency.

In early 2014 Cookson noted that the ACC launched the Plastics Oil-to-Technology Alliance, currently comprising five members, three of which are technology companies.

Cookson said part of the alliance's work is ensuring that the public is not confused about what materials are ideal for conversion.

SPONSORS


[ssiworld.com](#)


CURRENT ISSUE



DECEMBER 2014

FEATURES

- Keying in on quality
- Leaps and bounds ahead

DEPARTMENTS

- Pyramid Scheme?
- Datebook

[advertise](#)
[subscribe](#)

"What we're not talking about is bottles and containers and other things that have good solid markets," said Cookson. "We're talking about things that are a challenge to recycle."

Cookson said the industry should also work to raise awareness that plastics can be thought of as captured energy. To do that, he said the ACC in 2014 commissioned researchers at Columbia University to provide data and details on this issue. The team found that non-recycled plastics have on average 15,000 Btu per pound of energy value, "which is greater than pretty much all forms of energy except for natural gas and crude oil," he said.

Furthermore, Cookson said researchers found that all currently landfilled waste in the United States, if converted to energy or fuel, could power about 14 billion homes or 9 billion cars, and save about 6,000 acres of landfill space.

"That's a resource that's worth going after," he said.

Cookson also pointed out there's great versatility in the various energy recovery technologies, which include chemicals and fuels as well as power. This allows for flexibility when selecting a recovery method based on the economic situation of each region.

Cookson said the ACC's recently released economics [report on plastics-to-oil conversion](#), which has generated interest from both the energy and waste/recycling industries, provides further supporting evidence.

"The economics are critical," he said. "Getting all this data helps build cases of why this is an important thing to do."

Finally, Cookson said, the industry needs to do more to engage those beyond the waste and recycling industry. Materials suppliers, manufacturers, brand owners, retailers and other voices need to consider how energy recovery can be used to achieve sustainability goals.

"Let's bring those folks out and get them engaged in this more publicly," said Cookson. "If we activate all these voices and do a better job of reaching out beyond our comfort zone, I think we'll be even more impactful and hopefully see even greater success."

Next, Steven Torres, a partner in the municipal infrastructure group with the law firm [Pannone Lopes Devereaux & West](#), Providence, Rhode Island, discussed the importance of developing well-informed public private partnerships (P3), which he said are key to getting waste conversion projects off the ground.

He said the emergence of the P3 stems from the fact that waste management has traditionally been handled by the public sector, while recycling has traditionally been initiated in the private sector. Meanwhile, the energy conversion technology sector has had to straddle both sectors.

"The public-private partnership in waste and energy is born by the intersection of those two realities in our industry," Torres said.

Torres said one of the most important facets of a P3 is the presence of "enabling legislation" that allows for the combined design and construction of a conversion project.

"We need to develop legislation to facilitate building these projects," Torres said.

Torres explained that successful P3s tend to encompass the design, building, financing, ownership and operational factors for each proposed project.

"Those are the true P3s, where industry comes together with the government assets, the government's ability to regulate curbside collection, the government capability to make a choice on what to do with that valuable resource that we call municipal solid waste and that we call recyclables and reusable items."

Additionally, Torres said successful projects are able to satisfy and surpass environmental standards.

Torres recommended building a team of stakeholders, starting "outside city hall." Once a team is assembled, Torres said the next step is creating a matrix of objectives to be achieved from a regulatory standpoint and how those can be surpassed.

Objectives to be considered include the overall price of the project and pushing the legal framework to include enabling legislation. The team will also need to analyze the full menu of finance options, particularly if the project is expected to have tax exempt status.

Other objectives to be met, Torres said, include performance security measures, performance standards in compliance with environmental regulations and future expansion and financing plans.

Most importantly, Torres said, is building a strong partnership in which industry and the government work together to get the project approved.

Presenting the case for conversion from the local government's perspective was Zack Hansen, environmental health director for Minnesota's Ramsey County.

Ramsey County has for years partnered with nearby Washington County with regards to waste management policies, Hansen said, during a time when the state legislature has moved away from landfill use and toward a more integrated solid waste management system.

Hansen said most of the counties' waste is collected by private haulers, and the counties have for

RELATED NEWS

- Renewable Energy from Waste 2014: An integrated approach works
- Nearly 200 people gather in San Jose for Renewable Energy from Waste Conference
- City of San Jose shares public-private partnership success story at Renewable Energy from Waste Conference
- Seminar focuses on Italy's biogas market
- Renewable Energy from Waste Conference features big names in corporate sustainability
- NAWTEC 2014: WTE capacity developments
- US Composting Council seeks presentations



Tweets Follow

REW magazine @REWMagazine 6h Seattle food waste ordinance takes effect dlvr.it/82rNdY

REW magazine @REWMagazine 7h Empower Energies names new CFO dlvr.it/82p1Rk

Tweet to @REWMagazine



decades had to subsidize the tipping fees at the local waste-to-energy plant in order to compete with the region's low-cost landfills for the needed volume of waste.

Hansen said now is the time to rethink the WTE plan, which uses 25-year-old technology at the resource recovery facility, but which the counties have the option to purchase in 2015.

"To us it's expensive," Hansen said of the current plan. "We think there's more opportunity with the amount of money we have in the system to do something different."

He said Minnesota's already aggressive recycling goals will increase to 75 percent by 2030, indicating its changing policy environment.

"We've embarked on a paradigm shift. We're going to look at this as an asset and a resource," Hansen said, referring as well to the state's elected officials, and the county's plan to tie waste conversion measures to other county goals.

"We have to compete as a region for jobs and prosperity," said Hansen. "If we can find a way to use these resources locally, that's what we're most interested in."

Currently, he said about 41 percent of the counties' waste is being processed through its resource recovery facility and used to generate electricity. Hansen said the counties could once again benefit from flow control if they purchase the facility and become a public operator, but there are other options to consider.

"We are looking at how to accomplish our goal by working with private vendors," he said.

Hansen said the state's counties have analyzed what type of facility would be suitable with the current technology, considering policy, governance and financing alternatives. The commission's resulting 10-year plan incorporates more intensive source separation and use of the current facility, but also considers the use of gasification to produce biofuels and mixed waste processing with anaerobic digestion.

"We need the confluence of things," Hansen said, explaining that the effort has required a robust public policy process, along with a sincere effort to make waste conversion part of an integrated system that reduces health and environmental risks and makes economic sense.

It's a process that also tends to takes a long time, Hansen said.

"That's identifying all the people that hold a stake in this process, identifying where their interests are, then engaging them where they're at," he said.

Hansen said so far, support for the plan has been positive from those on the energy side, as well as in the recycling and solid waste sectors.

"I think changing the paradigm from waste to resource is helping the conversation," he said.



- Contact Us
- Subscribe
- Advertise

[Home](#) | [Magazine](#) | [News](#) | [E-Newsletters](#) | [Multimedia](#) | [Events](#) | [About](#)

© 1997-2015 GIE Media, Inc. All Rights Reserved. [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Use](#)

5811 Canal Road
Valley View, OH 44125 USA
P. 800-456-0707 | F. 216-525-0515